

The Principle of Change

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/27713126) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/27713126>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Elder Scrolls , Elder Scrolls Online , Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
Relationship:	Sotha Sil/Male Dunmer Vestige , Sotha Sil/Vestige , Divayth Fyr/Male Dunmer Nerevarine
Character:	Male Dunmer Vestige , Vestige (Elder Scrolls) , Sotha Sil , Sheogorath (Elder Scrolls) , Lorkhan (Elder Scrolls) , Male Bosmer Vestige , Nerevarine (Elder Scrolls) , Divayth Fyr
Additional Tags:	Post-Morrowind , Pre-Shivering Isles , Pre-Oblivion Crisis , Death of the self , Established Relationship
Series:	Part 3 of No Title
Stats:	Published: 2020-11-25 Chapters: 6/6 Words: 7019

The Principle of Change

by [Searofyr](#)

Summary

From the journal of Salyn Darovi, no title, Akavir 3E.

Sheogorath knows the Greymarch is close, and he'll need a replacement. He summons his long-time champion Salyn and his partner for a talk.

Salyn, who's used to turning things in his own favour, has to deal with grief, loss, and god-bartering.

Evasion

Some of us were sitting together debating the Akaviri housing situation yet again – mushroom tower or no, and if not, what instead – when Riakil came in with the grave expression that’s reserved for when it really can’t be helped. He pointed to Sil and me. “Sheogorath wants to speak to you both.”

“What about?” I asked.

“Can’t say.”

Sil carefully set down his quill. “I see he has found a new way to evade the Coldharbour Compact, ineffectual as it is now. Messages via Lorkhan. Very well.”

I smiled though the situation made me nervous; this was highly unusual. “It’s not like you’ve been particularly strict about enforcing anything with him. Even before things changed.”

“True. Perhaps this is the only logical consequence. If you give those associated with the Shivering Isles too much leeway, you can never take it back.” He shot me a sidelong glance and a smile, although his expression retained a cautious pensiveness. He was trying to calm me down, wasn’t he?

I leaned over and laid my chin on his shoulder. “You’re welcome.”

His smile deepened. He brushed his fingers down my hair and rested his hand on my shoulder. His eyes met mine. “But I’m afraid this is serious.” Smallest frown, pause, “I think.” And an almost hidden glint in his eyes at getting to say it. Still hasn’t gotten used to it. It’s the most endearing thing in the world. One of them anyway. The rest also all having to do with him.

“Shall we go?” he asked at last. “Let’s get ready. I trust you to set up the portal.”

I was about to agree when Divayth interrupted us from across the table. “Now, hold it. Both of you? Sil, you wouldn’t happen to have a contract with him yourself?”

“You know I do,” Sil said.

Divayth let out an annoyed sigh.

Riakil helpfully added, “He just mentioned it, too, you’ve really got to pay attention.”

“I understood what he said the first time, thank you,” Divayth said and turned to Sil again. “You’re evading the question.”

“He evades every question,” Riakil said. “Thought you’d be used to that by now.”

“And you’re helping him. In the most transparent way imaginable, I might add.”

“He’s the subtle one, not me. Look, this is between them and...”

“So you know about it.”

“Salyn’s my sworn brother,” Riakil said, “and Lorkhan knows when he has to talk. Of course I know.”

Divayth turned to Sil again. “Then wouldn’t I have a similar right to know?”

So this really bothered him. Shouldn’t have been surprised; he’s always steered clear of my patron.

Sil raised his eyebrows. “Still, not now. First, we will hear what he has to say. Perhaps then.”

Divayth sat back, looking marginally less tense. Still tense enough.

I used the pause I was given. “I feel the need to ask: Does Lorkhan just know everything already or did he learn from Sheogorath? And since it’s going to be the second, *why’d* he learn it from Sheogorath?”

“Sorry,” Riakil said, “can’t say. Just go there, for fuck’s sake, you’ll find out.”

Was he looking fidgety? More than usual anyway? He was, wasn’t he? I regarded him more closely.

He sighed theatrically. “It’s not a trap, alright?”

I turned to Divayth. “See, I don’t fare much better either.”

“But of course you know,” he said.

“I don’t know what this is about now.”

“You know about the contract. So I assume this is somehow your fault.”

“Of course,” Sil said, with a smile that melted my heart on the spot. “Everything is his fault.”

It's not you

I'll try to make this brief, measured, and reasonable, and my imminent and predictable failure will be a tribute to my patron of hundreds of years.

I set up the portal to the Shivering Isles, and we were in Mania, my preferred part by far. Sheogorath awaited us. We did our greetings. I won't drag it out. I can't now.

I expressed my appreciation for getting to talk in Mania specifically.

"I know you always liked it best here," he said. Seemingly jovial, but I've learned the tells of underlying tension as one of the first things in my dealings with him.

Now a quick jarring shift in tone. Faster, more upbeat, sharper: "But don't get too comfortable!" Like a knife being sharpened, slowly, deliberately, for a sudden stab. "Don't plan out your retirement yet. No eyeing the little huts and mushrooms and picking out furniture in your minds. But no, you never brought the mushroom dwellers. And now you're trying to convince them away from the mushroom-dwelling. Too bad! Cause you won't get any here! And then you'll regret it!"

"You expect upheaval then," Sil said, coolly, calmly, but in a friendly enough manner. I've never heard him use an unfriendly tone with Sheogorath, ever since I first took him here. Of course they've known each other for much longer, but back when Sil and I had just become a couple and were already absolutely and unreasonably certain about each other and what we wanted, I'd been the connecting party. At first I'd thought they got along because of me and the new contract we'd set up between us, but Sil explained it. Said that more often than not, they had the same ideas about creation, its preservation, and that of mortals. Said everything else was trappings, image, and differences in disposition.

"The new mortal got it," Sheogorath said. "The again-mortal. But not so mortal after all, are ya? Got help from a relative of mine. Could've asked me! I could've turned ya into... ah! I know! A Golden Saint! No... You're not stuffy enough anymore. Into... Ah, it's no use, ya don't fit in."

For some reason I was reminded of a test from years ago, when I'd still nominally visited as an agent of the Mages Guild, though my choice of patron was already some years old. Evicting a guest that didn't fit in. Had a bad feeling now. Sheogorath knows associations and works with them. He knows exactly how he chooses his words and when and why.

"You're not casting him out," I said. "No going back on our contract."

Sheogorath's eyes landed back on me. Sharp and not. Accommodating and somewhat sad daggers. "It's not going back on it so much as..."

I looked over to Sil. He looked composed. Like he understood. Moments like these reminded me I'd entered the picture a few thousand years late, and I usually hate the feeling, and Sil usually reassures me immediately. He knows me. And he knows how to handle me, to degrees that would be frightening if I didn't trust him absolutely. But I was supposed to be the champion of the Daedric Prince here. That was what I did. That was what I'd based a lot of my self-image on before Sil and I had met, and still quite a bit afterwards. But at the same time, Sil was the one that negotiated with Daedra and got something out of them. I'd do well to remember.

“I assume,” Sil said, “the area will change in the foreseeable future.”

“Ha! But ya can’t foresee the future anymore, can ya? Little mortal.”

“If you think this bothers me, you haven’t gotten to know me very well,” Sil said.

“Oh, I know you,” Sheogorath said, dropped his voice to the dull scraping of a sharpened knife, a benevolent warning. “I know you’ve wanted this. I knew before you two had even met, before you ever thought of it.” Leaned forward. “My champion was the one mortal who would dare.” Shrugged, edge gone, “and would mean well at the same time.”

Sil tried to get a reply in, but Sheogorath didn’t let him. “So you think you know what’s going on. But you don’t. I could say you haven’t gotten to know *me* very well.”

Sil met his eyes. “I would say I have.”

Sheogorath’s laugh was both triumphant and dull. “Ya haven’t. You met an accident. A phase. This time... But I’m getting ahead of meself. Where are my manners? Let’s get to the point, shall we?”

He turned to me. Looked into my eyes, searching them like he does sometimes. Sighed, as if he either found what he didn’t want to find, or found me lacking what he’d been looking for.

Out of a sudden compulsion, I stood closer to Sil, took his hand.

“Ha,” said Sheogorath, “you still have a madman’s instinct. You know who it is that saves you.”

I looked to Sil, who was frowning like he does when he’s sorting new information but the filing system’s unsatisfactory.

“Well, alright,” my patron said, “I’ll do it. Thank your sweetheart when this is over.”

He waved us both closer.

We stepped up to him.

A dangerous smile spread on his features, but his eyes didn’t follow. “The point is... What’s that saying you mortals have? If ya love something, set it free. If it comes back, it’s an idiot and will be crushed by rubble!”

I tried to make sense of it. I’m usually good at interpreting him, but I felt I was lacking some vital information there. “I’m not sure I follow,” I said. Best be honest.

Sil was silent for a moment, then said, “I’m quite certain I do. Generous. How long do you estimate for this?”

“Oh no,” Sheogorath said. “Oh no. This one will be different.”

Still couldn’t figure it out, for the life of me. “Mind filling me in?” I asked.

He waved it off in a grand gesture. “Details, details. He’ll tell ya later, I’m sure.” Turned to Sil. “Go ahead. No more need for secrecy. This time I have a backup plan.” Looked at us both in turn. “And the backup plan’s not you. Unfortunately? That means one thing.”

Built up tension like the circus director he likes to play.

I raised my eyebrows. You've got to give him a little. Appreciate the art of storytelling. Very important.

Into the silence he exclaimed, "Yer fired! Both of ya!"

Not what I'd expected.

Sil looked puzzled, too. Still composed, but puzzled.

"Ah," Sheogorath said, "I've finally managed to surprise ya." Turned to me. "You're fired. From everything. The job. The title. The obligations. The home. The afterlife option. You're out." Looked at Sil, back at me. "Both of you. After this, I don't want to see you here anymore. And I don't want anyone else to see you here anymore either. None of me. None of anyone else. No one!"

Unlike me, Sil seemed to grasp something then. "None of you, none of anyone else. A larger change then."

"Ya won't see me anymore. Don't try to. What you'll see..." He crossed his arms and looked at Sil like a particularly casual army general. "And don't you try to follow order. You've lost all credibility there. It's not for you. And don't let *him* follow it either."

"Why would I..." I was still lost, and I hated it.

He turned to me. No more affectation. "Tell me. Salyn Darovi of House Dres. Why did you stick around? All your friends and family are Lorkhan's. Your sweetheart was a god. Now he's not. But you had enough time to convert before that."

"You know he's no god to me," I said superfluously.

"I know. Still! Why did you stay? The position? The sense of... purpose? Doing something sensible and meaningful?" He was grinning again but then switched it off. "An identity? Power?"

"You know everything, don't you?" I said. "At first a mix of a few things. But then... Well, I got used to you. The person. Why are you making me say this when you're firing me?" In truth it was not yet fully sinking in.

"You'd follow *me*. You like me."

"Well. Yeah."

"Told you. That's why. Don't follow order. Don't get the idea to stick around old me. Or new me. Or whatever-me. Once you're out of here, you're out. Expelled. No heroics. No last-minute decisions, daring deeds, rescue and sacrifice, none of it. You hear me? What I want is you two out of here. He'll explain it to you. No more time. I've dragged this out longer than I should have. One more thing. I've handed over your contract – both of ya, I'm not cruel – except when I am, but not to you. My relative's got ya, the obvious one, been pestering me about you for years. We made a deal, him and I. He gets you, I get ... meself! Ha!" The raised voice and sharp smile lasted just for a moment, then he was serious again. "And it's not you. Congratulations. You're going to Lorkhan. Like it or not. I won't have any complaints. And you..." He turned to Sil, turned on those shining semi-benevolent daggers in his gaze once more. "Keep your eye on him. And get him out of my

sight before I change my mind.”

Sil did as asked.

We got home.

I didn't want to speak to a soul.

I wrote this in the frenzy of a restless mind in a paralysed frame.

Sil laid his hand on mine. Laid the paper on the table, pried the quill from my fingers, kissed them, laid the quill aside, sat next to me, ran his hands through my hair, over and over until the worst paralysis was over and my eyes were considering shedding those tears but still held back, just in case, what if, what about, what now? He kissed me, and I clung to him, and then he explained me the Greymarch.

I'm not writing that part. Secrecy, respect, superstition, too taxing, who in Oblivion knows?

There's one in Oblivion who knows everything, but his days are numbered.

Transfer protocol: Dusk Interlude

Riacil knocked and asked for admission, Sil called him in.

My little brother came up to us, laid his hands on our shoulders, one each, said, “Let’s talk tomorrow or whenever you’re ready. You’re welcome, and you’re wanted, both of you, and it’ll be alright. But for now, you grieve. Take your time. And Salyn, do yourself a favour and cry.”

Let go of us and swiftly left the room, shut the door behind him.

I followed my brother’s advice. He’s smart about these things.

I looked to my paper. Sil got up, gave me the writing utensils, took up his place next to me again. I wrote this.

Looked at the earlier lines. Said to Sil, “You think we should take his advice and go along with their stupid mushroom tower idea? Who knows what he knows? And I still trust him... Damn it. Showed we can, right? Just now.”

“We could,” Sil said. “It would probably be wise, as much as one wants to see his wisdom as that. But I know you do. I leave the decision to you. I follow.”

Something about when he talks like this... Skooma can’t be too much worse. I pulled him closer.

He smiled the smallest knowing smile.

“I love you,” I said though my voice wasn’t any good.

“And I love you,” he said and leaned in close. “We’ll talk more about the future tomorrow. But let’s keep this plan. I believe it was a hint, as clear as he would make it. For whichever reason.”

I swallowed. Tried to talk, didn’t. Then did after all. “Dying request from our uncle. Our precognitive uncle. Would be bad luck to refuse.” I’d said it. Took a deep breath, released it.

Sil ran his fingers through my hair again. “Tomorrow I will ask you for something, on the patron contract matter. But not now.”

I pulled him in as close as I could, kissed him and was finally able to stop thinking.

Transfer protocol: Post-dawn Interlude

The room was brightly lit despite the heavy curtains by the time we were both awake and attempting lucidity.

Sil lay on his back, and sometimes on his side, a bit askew, his head by my shoulder, looking at me and away again with fleeting smiles. It doesn't matter how much the world falls apart around me otherwise; this is always the most enchanting thing in it, and I told him so.

He laid his cheek against my shoulder, closed his eyes with a smile.

"Salyn," he said after a while, quietly. "Is it alright if I'm happy?"

"It's what I live for," I said, and caressed his face, his hair. "Always have, since I met you. If I can make you happy, things aren't futile."

He turned his head, kissed the palm of my hand. "You do. You always have."

I sighed and wrapped him up in my arms. Morning hours between reason and the remnants of the utter disregard for it. "You're everything, and you've always been everything, and always will be, and I never want you to doubt it. If you do, let me know, and I'll try to show you better."

"I know," he said, with that old natural certainty in his voice. "But you're always welcome to show me."

"As much as you want."

An echo of a smile I'd seen before, and an echo of an earlier response. "That would be difficult."

"We've got time now," I said. "We're has-beens in exile."

His smile grew. "We are."

I had to mirror his smile. "You like that fact, don't you?"

"I do."

"Good."

He traced his fingers down my back. "We have more to talk about before we go out there. Face them, face Lorkhan, eventually. But not yet. Let me just stay like this a while longer."

"Anything you want."

Transfer protocol: Clarifications

When we were sitting up and ready for the more serious topics, I started, "Let me surmise. From... information. That I think I've got. From you, I mean."

Sil raised an eyebrow and gave me a quizzical smile. "Let's hear it."

"You don't mind my loss of status. Doesn't play a role for you. Correct?"

"I'm glad you understand." How does he always warm my heart like that?

I continued. "You don't want to give me time to feel sorry for myself; you think I've got things to do. And..." I ran my fingers through his hair. "Responsibilities."

He leaned into the touch, eternally intoxicating. "Correct. But I will be there for you. I hope you understand that, too."

"I do." Leaned over and kissed him. "Thank you." Looked at him, contemplated myself and my state and the kinds of conversations we'd been having. "I'm keeping upright now, but I'll probably fall apart again later."

"You always can."

"Thanks."

"What else?"

This next one was harder, and made me hesitate more, in case I was wrong. "You would have stayed."

"Yes," he said. "It would have been a struggle for you and for your self had you accepted the role of Sheogorath. And the fact of the matter is that I'm only interested in you. Out of all. Out of anyone and anything. It's never been any different. So it would have still had to be you, specifically. And the strain would have taken a toll on you. And I prefer you unfiltered; and I am very sure you prefer the same. You take great pride in yourself, and I will add, I love that. I would have stayed with you, of course. I would have loved you, of course. But I'm glad it didn't come to that."

I nodded, after I was sure it had all sunken in, and kissed him again.

"There is nothing you need to worry about," he added. "Never. Not even in that case. We would have managed; there is not even a question about us. Do you understand?"

At last I was able to smile again. "Yeah."

"Then I will just add... I've known Sheogorath for a while, as you know. Not as well as you ended up knowing." A rare concession from him. Very rare. "But still, well enough. You would have made a good successor. But I'm glad you're not. And I'm sure he thinks the same. Part of him regrets it, of course. But to forego his clear favourite for the role of himself, in his own stead, while he feels himself become what he hates... I will say it in case you need to hear it. He must really love you. Remember that."

That made me cry again, and the conversation was interrupted. Takes those phases, I guess.

When we picked it back up, he was all business. Looked me in the eye. “I have some questions for you. First. As a former but long-time champion of Sheogorath, you understand states of mind. When you look at your own, are you ready to make decisions about the future of our existence and our souls? Your soul?”

So we were getting to the Lorkhan part. Transfer of contracts. Official business. I did him the favour and thought about it, watched myself. Thought about it more and about my regular philosophy. “In my opinion, it’s unwise to make important decisions in completely lucid and rational states. There’s more truth in the rest. And you need truth, or you make decisions against yourself.”

He smiled. “Ah yes. That is what you’re like. And you’ve familiarised me with it. I’ve decided for you, after all. And I can’t claim my mental states were always at their most clear and detached.” He lowered his voice, “I’ve never regretted my decision, not once.”

I wanted to pull him close and kiss him and lower him onto the bed, but we were supposed to talk seriously, and so I had to do this the talking way, and that naturally turned quiet and unstable – “I’m so glad you want me.”

“More than anything,” he said, with weight and clarity behind it, like he does to show it’s not a figure of speech but he’s serious. “More than I can ever say. And you know it’s more than anything, because I let you save me. If you had not been first to me, there had been anything on par with you, I would have chosen to stay as part of my... my former city.”

“That idea you had back then.”

“That I didn’t pursue any further, yes. Because of you. I chose to be selfish. And so you get me instead.”

My breath caught, and I brought out, “That’s all I want,” and he gave me that radiant smile, and I was lost once more. It happens. He does that.

Eventually, I drew the only conclusion I could: “I’m ready to make decisions, yeah.”

He nodded, leaned close, all seriousness once more. “So let me ask you a follow-up question: Will you not only decide, but let *me* decide? Will you place everything in my hands, and allow me to make decisions for the two of us that you may dislike?”

The question should have scared me, should have made me halt and think things over, but it didn’t. “You hold everything. I trust you. You do that.”

He nodded again, simply. “Shall we explain to the rest of them what is going on? I think in a group it’s best. If everyone tells someone, and they tell another, because by someone’s logic someone always has a right to know... Let’s spare ourselves that.”

“Good idea,” I said. “And then Riakil and probably Lorkhan?”

“Yes. But not without breakfast. You are always the one to insist. I don’t think either of us is in any state to have that kind of conversation on an empty stomach.”

“You’re right.”

He smiled, kissed me, got up. “One last negotiation then. I plan to be done after this. Unforeseen events excluded. Are you alright with that?”

I remained seated, looked up at him, thought it through. Thought about what he meant. “You want to make it something final.”

“I do.”

“Do it.” I got up, too.

We met Lothryn first, on the way to the shared kitchen.

He raised an eyebrow to Sil, which Sil responded to with raised eyebrows of his own and a barely-there smile. Then it vanished again.

“You’re alive,” Lothryn said.

“Yes,” said Sil.

“So,” Lothryn turned to me in particular, “something serious, is it?”

“Yeah.” I noticed I still hated talking about this.

Sil took charge of the situation, which I was grateful for. “We will explain. Gather everyone in a while. After breakfast.”

“Will do,” he said and vanished.

Sometime later, with everyone present, we explained to those who didn’t know the concept of the Greymarch, and to those who did, the current practical relevance.

In a bit, we’ve got an appointment with my chosen family’s chosen patron god. Putting it like that makes it sound like something a person can get used to. In theory.

Transfer protocol: Make it something final

Lorkhan had the grace to appear all manifested, and in his merish form, too. Clearly inspired by Riakil's form, no wonder, but different. Tall and pointy-bearded. Kept up his own standard roguish look as if to tell us he's not trustworthy in the least. Maybe tried to make me feel at home.

"So," he said. "You're mine now. Close the door, sit down, let's talk. Riakil is around somewhere next door, but he says Sil likes to negotiate in privacy so let's give you two the illusion."

And of course we both had to smile at that, damn him. We did as asked and sat opposite him on a bench.

He leaned forward, mustered us for a moment, gave us a pleased smile. Nodded to Sil. Turned to me. "First of all. I know the loss, and I feel it, too. Some things are hard to explain, but if you lost Riakil and Riakil also held aspects of yourself. To put it very, very crudely. Similar to that. Of course he'll still be around; he'll be his original self even, but you get used to things, and they become normal. Anyway. Don't think I don't know or respect it. I also know this isn't your first choice. But I'm glad you've agreed at last."

I tried to hold back the tears in my eyes, swallow them back, look composed. It was good to be understood at least. Couldn't speak. All constricted.

He nodded. "Alright, so. Any questions? I bet you have lots." He turned to Sil, tactful enough to give me space to compose myself. "You first?"

"I would like to renegotiate," Sil said.

Lorkhan sat back with a sigh, tilted back his head. "For fuck's sake. Of course you do." He sat up straight. "You already renegotiated with Sheogorath when you joined in with Salyn's contract. What's it now?"

"Some flaws have become apparent."

"What if I don't want to negotiate with you? Take the contract as is. That's it. Look, you're infamous. Maybe I want to spare myself the headache."

"And spare yourself the benefits, too?"

Lorkhan let out a theatrical sigh. All an act, the humour was in his voice and the glint in his eyes and the exaggeration of annoyance that he picked up from Riakil, or was it the other way round, or was it both of them from the start? I bet he got it from Riakil. "I've *been* through negotiations, for a long, long time. Getting you two was hard, you have any idea?"

"Tell us," Sil said. "I'm curious. I'm sure Salyn is, too."

I was, and I said so.

"Fine," said Lorkhan. "Since we're doing this. Why not? You're not getting all the steps and

details, and I'll be simplifying the ways of communication so mortals can pick it up." He shot a grin to Sil, not a malicious one though.

"Gracious," Sil said.

"Right? So."

"So," Sil said, "someone will become Sheogorath in his stead. And that someone is an acceptable substitute for Salyn, who was the obvious favourite. That person comes from you?"

"Yeah. There's an Imperial that was mine. Traded him in."

"Two for one," Sil stated. "And we're not entirely insignificant, I would say."

I smiled. "As I said. We're has-beens in exile. We've done our jobs."

Lorkhan turned to me. "Yeah, and I'm keeping you well out of that next one. It's not that you're completely useless now, you can still both think, and that's in short supply these days, you'll see, but I'm glad to have both of you out of the way here in Akavir. You and the whole group, in fact."

"Well, that sounds bad," I said. "Again?"

"Worse. Trouble with Dagon brewing. We'll be needing a few exceptional people if we intend to stand any chance."

"We're exceptional."

Lorkhan pointed at me. "You, my friend, are also way too sympathetic to Dagon's principles."

"I'm not going to turn against you. All of you. Nirn. Sil's work. The thought itself is offensive, come on. Besides, I got along with a few of his people, and a few concepts are interesting to me, yeah, but I don't want a world ruled by him any more than I wanted one ruled by Nocturnal."

Lorkhan grinned. "Upheaval, overthrowing of old hierarchies? Strength through adversity? Overcoming limitations? Toppling what's set above you? Doesn't sound familiar at all?"

"It's just one part. I'll..." Were we already in the middle of negotiations, or was this idle chatter? It occurred to me that my words probably mattered so I should start choosing them with *some* sort of care. "I'll admit to some sympathy for that kind of thing. Alright? You're not stupid, I know. By the way, I prefer a patron who knows me, so that works in your favour. But it's the context that matters. And anyway, he treats his people too badly. No interest in that."

"How about Sheogorath?" Lorkhan asked. "I assume you're not blind."

"Yeah, there's that. Some things gave me stomach aches; had to look away from them. But Sheogorath picks favourites and spoils them more or less, and you're the same. We were his favourites. I hope we're among yours."

He snorted. "You can be entirely too trusting sometimes, you know that? Not that I'm going to deny it. You are. You were for both of us. The trouble I went through to get you two... But convince me more; I'm curious. So you went from noble principles to selfish benefits."

"Right," I said, "that's the more important factor. I've got both myself and Sil to worry about. Dagon picks favourites, too, but he puts them through the wringer worse. Cause he believes in that. And I have no interest in that. The paradoxical thing is that for all that he wants upheaval to get the

most extraordinary to the top, in *his* realm, you're best off being completely mediocre. His attention's not a good thing. And we're not mediocre, and we're not good at avoiding attention. So... I know what you're thinking, or I think I know. I've lost my patron, I'm without orientation, and feeling lost and useless, and I've always leaned towards Daedra, and I amuse myself with Dagon's culture on and off, and that's all true. But I made a conscious decision against him in my youth, and all I've learned since then has confirmed that."

His grin had been growing while I was speaking. "You know what? I'm convinced. Actually am. You're so sincere in your arrogance, I can't help but believe you. Anyway, you're not going. You're staying in safety in Akavir, and sitting it out, and learning to become functional people without a world to save. Can't have you going crazy in the eras to come, by which I mean *actually*-crazy, not mad-god's-privileged-emissary-crazy, which isn't truly crazy. I've had too many champions and agents and favourites that couldn't deal with themselves without a monumental task all the time, and that's a flaw. You lot will be me correcting that."

"Generous," Sil said.

"I know. Aren't you glad I noticed in time? And anyway we've got people. New people. Younger than you. Possibly more exceptional. There *are* greater people than you, believe it or not. More noble. More willing to live for a cause. Less capricious. Less arrogant."

I couldn't help but say, "But you wanted us instead. For yourself."

"Guess I like 'em difficult." Our new patron shook his head, grin still in place. "I know who my people are. For better or worse." Looked up at me. "But yeah. I did."

Sil shot me a smile, then took up the conversation again. "You repeatedly talk of 'we'."

"Akatosh."

Sil raised an eyebrow. "It's that serious."

"It is. We need someone to save the Empire again. And here's where the bargaining really started. We picked two main candidates to help us, each of us got one. Now Akatosh: Whenever he wants something, he keeps bringing up that I took his Empress. And I keep telling him she was never his to begin with, she chose me. And she never would have chosen to become Empress. And anyway, he has to stop soul-trapping people in that thing. I know I've got my own connection to it, it was mine, but he's been using it as if it was all his. Kind of like someone else I know with something else of mine." He gave a pointed look to Sil.

Sil actually went quiet for a moment. Inclined his head. "I apologise. I never properly did."

Lorkhan gave him a melting smile. "Ahh don't worry 'bout it. All forgiven. It's really damn hard to be mad at you."

Sil looked so quietly happy at that, I followed the impulse to wrap my arms around him, hold him tightly for a moment. He rested his hands on my arms.

I turned to Lorkhan. "Thanks. I won't forget that."

"Yeah, yeah." He was still looking touched.

I reluctantly let go of Sil and sat up straight.

Lorkhan continued. “So anyway, Akatosh. I’m telling him, Who wants to spend eternity with a bunch of dead emperors? And let’s be honest, most of them aren’t the most pleasant of people. Tell you who’s *not* going to choose that, a woman who has high standards and wants a proper afterlife with her husband, that’s for sure. Last time he sounded like he’d even think about it.

Anyway, some time ago, he got my Emperor in turn. One that actually did turn Emperor. Sheogorath wanted him, too. Tried really hard. But Akatosh won that one fair and square. And a bit unfairly, too. Broke the rules, looked me in the eye – all figurative here, but you get the idea – and said, ‘I will tell you this once. I am doing you a favour. Believe me if you wish.’ I chose to believe him. Anyway, so he got Tiber.”

I whistled. “So he still owed you, right?”

“No, not entirely, I also had an old debt for him saving Riakil once, and Clavicus was involved, and then in the current negotiations Akatosh had to pry the one guy away from Sanguine, and I was happy to leave that one to him, I’ve got no interest at all in dealing with Sanguine. So I got the other one.” He interrupted his chatter to lean forward, look at both of us, lowered his voice, smiled. “Descendant of *my* Empress, who was never going to become Empress, I keep telling him. Normally I don’t do blood lines, that’s Akatosh’s thing, but sometimes it works.”

Now that was a revelation. “And that’s the one going to Sheogorath now?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Does Diesala know?”

“She knows. She always guessed something like that. Sheogorath let something slip to her back in the early days, about wanting to bring in one of her line. She’s fine with it. The descendant’s decision in the end. Like you, she trusts that the Isles can be a good fate and an honour.”

I nodded, slowly. Turned to Sil.

He took the cue. “I think I’ve heard enough. Here is my first demand. No more bartering. We stay with you. It doesn’t matter what else happens, it doesn’t matter if you turn out closer to death again. We are not going, you are not trading us in, sending us away, giving us away. We stay with you. It’s your problem how you accomplish that. But we will help. Of course.”

Lorkhan raised his eyebrows. “Go on.”

“If there appears any question of choice between Salyn and me and someone else, you still won’t hand us over. I needn’t say it, but I will; of course, Salyn and I won’t be separated. It’s obvious that you can’t and won’t give Riakil away either, and we won’t allow it. We stay, as well. And this is entirely regardless of how the new Sheogorath turns out.”

So that was what he’d wanted. The decisions he said I might not like. But I found I did. I reached over, took his hand and kissed it. “He speaks for us both, of course,” I said.

Lorkhan looked amused and a little troubled. “That’s effort, you know.”

“I know,” Sil said. “We’re not low maintenance followers you can keep on the side.”

“So I see. And what do I get from this?”

“What I just said.”

Silence.

“You want us, don’t you?” Sil added.

Lorkhan broke into laughter then. “Fuck. You know, I wasn’t present at the other occasions, but I’ve heard the talk. Sure, you’re infamous, but this kind of argument is new, isn’t it?”

Sil smiled and inclined his head. “It is.”

Lorkhan looked over to me. “Your fault. Well. What if I say yes?”

“Then,” Sil said, “let me add. Riakil, of course. Salyn and I. We have that. In fact, the entire group here, and associates in Sovngarde.” He listed the names. “I’m sure you understand. This is only reasonable.”

A grin was fixed on our new patron’s face. “Only reasonable, right. Only natural. Why don’t you throw the wood elves’ snakes into the mix?”

“If you want,” Sil said.

“Of course, of course. You’re already talking like one of mine, always asking for something. Anything else?”

“Sovngarde and the question of mortality. We had an arrangement with Sheogorath. It’s a little outdated. Now with assorted help, Salyn and I are both functionally immortal, you know all that, but if for any reason...”

He waved off the question. “Yeah, yeah. You’re both welcome in Sovngarde. I won’t force either of you to stay immortal. You want to move over, or you have to, no questions asked, you come over. I’m keeping you together, too. Timeline-wise as well as location-wise, metaphysical-wise, all of it. You needn’t bring it up. After Divayth’s insane bargain that one time, I’ve learned a thing or two about you people. You’re all crazy. And you two come straight from Sheogorath. That’s fine. I’ll accommodate you being crazy. If you need adjustments, let me know. I love you and I mean well with you.”

“Thanks,” I couldn’t help but say. Shouldn’t have talked yet, if Sil wanted to bargain for more, but I was touched, and relieved, and I had to.

Sil smiled at me and faced Lorkhan again. “All of us. Everyone I’ve named.”

Lorkhan sighed. “I assume you mean including the *actually* immortal ones. Immortal-by-prophecy ones. Like, say, a Nerevarine and someone who had his lifespan tied to his with an idiotic risk.”

“Naturally.”

“What else?”

“No interference with our selves,” Sil said. “Apparently this needs to be included.”

“I won’t. Unless it’s to preserve your souls and your selves as your authentic ones. Say someone else corrupts you, I’ll interfere.”

“Good. Acceptable. Do we need to specify in detail?”

Lorkhan sighed. “We can if you want, but you can also believe me that I *want* you to be yourselves. That’s the whole point in getting you. About all of this, extend me some trust, and you won’t regret it.”

That one took a while for Sil to think about, then he nodded. “I accept, for both of us. So. These are our terms.”

Lorkhan snorted. “Fine. You know what? Fine. I accept, too, all your terms. Promise I won’t try to cheat you with any word games and whatnot either. We all want this, so why not?”

Sil gave him a radiant smile. “Thank you. Then it’s a pleasure.”

“You know what I’m thinking?” Our new official patron leaned forward. “I’m thinking you were being loyal, and that aside, guilt is always a strong motivator for you, and so you wouldn’t have asked either way. But you’ve been wanting this.”

“I have.” Sil looked to me. “I liked the previous arrangement, I chose it after all, and I would have kept to it. I will also say that I did not foresee this. I expected the Greymarches to be nothing more than disruptive phases after which we would pick up as usual. But I’m glad.”

I regarded him. “Yeah,” I brought out, “this isn’t bad. Isn’t bad at all. It’s settled, right?”

Lorkhan nodded. “It’s settled.”

“Good,” I said. “I...” Paused. Couldn’t say it. Looked at Sil once more. Looked at Lorkhan. Oh alright. “I like it, too.”

“Then welcome to the family, both of you,” our patron said. “Relax. Take your time to grieve, I get it. Try to be at least somewhat normal people for a change. Help the rest of the lot, too. And now get out of here; I need to plan. You’re giving me a lot of work. On top of the other work. Extra trouble, extra insurances, like I don’t also have a creation and an Empire to help save *yet* again, and like I don’t also have to equip a hero that isn’t even mine anymore except by birth, cause I just *had* to bargain with a Mad God so we could save two exceedingly troublesome Dark Elves. That I, for some unfathomable reason, kept wanting for myself. And who are known everywhere for how if you offer them your little finger, they take your arm and then tear your house down.” But he looked like he’d just won the victory of a lifetime.

It’s not the worst feeling to make someone look like that by joining his side.

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